DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 623 CS 211 835

AUTHOR Cross, Geoffrey A.
TITLE Conflict and Capitulation: A Bakhtinian Analysis of a Failed Collaboration.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (40th, Seattle, WA, March 16-18, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; *Business Correspondence; Case Studies; Conflict; *Organizational Communication; *Writing Processes; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Bakhtin (Mikhail); *Collaborative Writing; Hierarchical Control; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

To help business writers and writing teachers think more specifically about problems of writing collaboration, a study examined and analyzed a group writing project in the Auldouest Insurance Company (pseudonym) Department of Corporate Communication. The collaborative writing of the two page executive letter of the company's annual report involved a 77-day production process, exceeding its deadline by six weeks. Data collection included: fieldnotes from participant observation (six to eight hours daily for 100 working days); audiotapes and transcriptions of 10 executive-letter editing sessions; research process log; oral interviews (43 taped and transcribed); personal documents (meeting notes and drawings); and official documents (external and internal reports and communication). Analysis revealed that the finished letter largely ignored important audiences, including the company's policyholders. Several forces, identified by M. M. Bakhtin in "Discourse in the Novel," acted upon the writing process. Centripetal forces, which unify and centralize the verbal ideological world, included time constraints and a "get-along" attitude. Centrifugal forces, which push toward fragmentation of language through specialization into dialects and discourse communities, included serial communication, the personal nature of the document, and different perceptions of the audience. Convertible forces--those acting as either or both centripetal and centrifugal--included the hierarchical distribution of power and the lack of clear directions. Analysis revealed that the interplay and shifting alignment of numerous socially rooted forces may determine the outcome of group-writing endeavors. (One figure, four tables of data, and 38 references are attached.) (MM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED307623

Conflict and Capitulation:

A Bakhtinian Analysis of a Failed Collaboration

Geoffrey A. Cross

University of Louisville

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Geoffrey Cross

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Paper presented at the 1989 Conference on College Composition and Communication

CS211835

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Geoffrey A. Cross
Assistant Professor
Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY 40292

Conflict and Capitulation: A Bakhtinian Analysis of a Failed Collaboration

Although research strongly suggests that group writing is widely employed in industry, only a few published descriptive studies of writer-editor revision in industry exist. One study conducted by James Paradis, David Dobrin, and Richard Miller, does not describe specific instances of collaboration. Another widely known study, Stephen Doheny-Farina's "Writing in an Emerging Organization: An Ethnographic Study," describes a successful group-writing process.

Nancy Allen, Dianne Atkinson, Meg Morgan, Teresa Moore, and Craig Snow state that "A study of . . . 'failed' instances [of collaboration] and their causes would be especially useful to corporations and organizations that encourage collaboration" (87). Literature on the writing of annual reports and literature on collaborative writing suggest that such instances are not uncommon. Over one-third of the respondents to Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's survey on group writing said that they would **not** describe their collaborative experiences as "very productive" or even "productive" (76). Drawing upon the findings of my dissertation, An Ethnographic Exploration of Editor-Writer Revision at a Midwestern Insurance Company, based upon a 5-month participant-observation, this paper will describe and analyze a largely unsuccessful group-writing process. For a summary of the methods of data gathering, please see Table 1. While the process

described is unique, hearing this description may help business writers and writing teachers think more specifically about potential and actual problems of collaboration.

Table 1
Data Collection Record

Observation
- Fieldnotes from participant observation in the Auldouest Dept. of Corporate Communication (10/86-3/87), six-eight hours daily for 100 working days.
- Audiotapes and transcriptions of 10 executive-letter editing sessions
- Research Process Log

Oral Interviews (43 taped and transcribed)
- Open-Ended Interviews
  - Questionnaire-Based
  - Informal
- Discourse-Based Interviews (15)
- Interviews with Specific, Pre-Constructed Questions

Document Collection
- Personal Documents--Participants' drawing and notes of meetings
- Official Documents
  - Internal: all drafts of the observed documents that were seen by another editor, memos, proposals, newsletters, reports, forms, questionnaires, internal news releases
  - External: all annual reports published by the company, the company history, press biographies of corporate officers, letters to the press and policyholders, press releases, and radio scripts

---

When planned on Oct 13, 1986 the executive letter of the annual report of the Auldouest Insurance Company (pseudonym) was expected to be completed in about five weeks. But only after

seven major drafts and after three different people had written new versions "from scratch" was the letter approved on December 29, 1986. Not only did the 77-day production process of this two-page letter exceed its deadline by six weeks, but the finished letter also largely ignored important audiences, including half a million policyholders.

As M.M. Bakhtin states in "Discourse in the Novel," his seminal essay collected in The Dialogic Imagination, "It is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of a language" (272). The "embattled tendencies" are centrifugal and centripetal forces. Centripetal forces are "the forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world" (270). Centrifugal forces push toward fragmentation of the language through specialization into dialects and discourse communities. These forces, inherent in language and in the **process** of its articulation, are socially rooted. The group writing of the Auldouest executive letter was not more successful because of the interaction of these forces that greatly contributed to the end result. Centrifugal forces encouraged conflict and divergent points of view in the group-writing process. Centripetal forces encouraged agreement or acquiescence and a unified point of view. Some forces that I call convertible forces worked centrifugally at one point and centripetally at another point in the process (all of these forces are listed in

Table 2, "Production of the Executive Letter"). Centrifugal forces within the writing context prolonged the production process, and centripetal forces caused a partially ineffectual final written product. In order to consider this interaction of forces, we may divide the production of the letter into three phases (please see Table 3, "The Plot"): periods of stability, instability, and "resolution." Centripetal forces were dominant during the first and third phase, while centrifugal forces prevailed during the prolonged period of instability.

The physical context in which these forces interacted evinced the emphasis upon hierarchy at Auldouest. The Department of Corporate Communication is located on the third floor of the home office building (see Figure 1). The first ten floors are occupied by Auldouest employees. The next 22 floors are rented out to other businesses. The 33rd (top) floor is occupied by board members of Auldouest. This building stands as a concrete-and-steel metaphor for the communication problems that occurred at the company.

The first events during the period of stability were the Department of Corporate Communications' two brainstorming meetings for the annual report. The executive letter was a component of the annual report, although the letter was also sent out separately in bills to policyholders. Because one of the two top executives was new, the Vice President had encouraged fresh approaches and new ideas. But the letter was not discussed very much in these brainstorming sessions, chiefly because most of the

participants were not told before the second meeting that the Department was required to write this letter that was ostensibly from the company's top management. During the sessions, the audiences of the letter were not identified. After the meetings, the Supervisor wrote an annual report outline that mentioned the image to be portrayed in the executive letter: "We are a forward looking company dealing successfully with difficult problems." This image is one the company had presented of itself for several previous years.

The Supervisor and Vice President of the Department next met with the President and the CEO of Auldouest. The corporate leaders suggested making only a few changes and approved the outline. The Supervisor and the Vice President were elated that this outline was approved--typically the first outline was rejected. Next, because the Supervisor believed that her subordinate, the Writer, had had better luck getting documents approved by top management recently, she delegated the writing of the first draft of the letter to the Writer. During the first editing session of the letter, the Supervisor suggested some changes, but she also suppressed a conflict, against her better judgment allowing the Writer to state that the public "must understand that surplus is a sign of corporate health, not corporate greed."

These actions completed the stable period of the document-production process. Several factors had contributed to the dominant centripetal tendency toward agreement during this phase.

First, since the four subordinates in the department of corporate communication did not know before the second meeting that they were expected to prepare ideas for the letter, they did not contribute anything, and the lack of many divergent views reduced the potential for conflict. Secondly, while the Supervisor and Vice President had initially encouraged new ideas and a different approach, they decided to use the previously established approach to the letter, perhaps because of the lack of feedback they had received. Thirdly, a lack of clear, specific direction from the managers obscured their conflicting attitudes about disclosure of underwriting losses and other "negatives." Fourth, the "people-pleasing" suppression of conflict advocated by a collaborative writing seminar that she had attended encouraged the Supervisor to permit the Writer more ownership of the "authors'" document. Lastly, fast-approaching deadlines created even less incentive for anyone to disagree.

The first event that occurred during the period of instability was that the Vice President rejected the first draft of the letter, and the Supervisor challenged this decision. One of the Vice President's chief objections was to the Writer's "the public must understand" phrase. The Writer, who saw her audience as other industry leaders, felt that the words conveyed the tone of one equal talking to another. But because the Vice President saw the public as the chief audience of the letter (he equated the half million policyholders with the public), he felt that the Writer's words were dictatorial. The Vice President

criticized the Supervisor for delegating the writing of the letter to the Writer, who had not been in on the meeting with the "authors." In order to see the different audience constituencies and priorities of all of the participants, please see Table 4.

Shortly after criticizing the Supervisor for adding another link to the serial chain of communication, however, the Vice President asked the Senior Vice President, who had not been in the meeting with top management and the Department, to referee the decision. The Senior Vice President supported the Vice President's judgment. He also told the Supervisor to add "negative" details to prepare policyholders for imminent rate increases. These details supported the image of the company as one that was recovering from an industry-wide slump. This image was accurate. To be sure, the company had increased its surplus accounts for the year. Surplus accounts are reserves amassed in order to fund the payment of unusual, catastrophic claims (e.g., tornado damage). But the company had suffered a $5 million operating loss. The Supervisor and Writer rewrote the draft, incorporating their bosses' suggestions.

From the Department of Corporate Communications, the letter was sent up to the 33rd floor for approval by the President and the CEO. Two executive secretaries reviewed the document first, penciling in numerous editing changes that damaged the visual presentation of the letter before it reached top management. While some of the changes were legitimate, a considerable number were not. For example, one secretary substituted the word "halt"

for "stop" because she believed that to "stop" meant "to halt temporarily."

After reviewing the edited draft, the President and the CEO rejected it. The CEO, an accountant, said that he wanted the first paragraphs of the letter to present a more detailed disclosure of the financial highlights of the year. The President's chief criticism was that the letter was "negative." During the editing sessions on the top floor, negative facts, including the overt disclosure of the company's operating loss, were deleted from the letter. From this point on, the traditional picture of Auldouest, that of a recovering company within a struggling industry, was replaced by a picture of a successful company, the President's view of the organization. The company's policy toward disclosure, then, had shifted from candor to camouflage. Operating losses had been overtly mentioned in the six previous executive letters (please see handout 6).

The President then met with the Senior Vice President and communicated the new concept of the letter. It was decided that the Senior Vice President, the Supervisor, and the Writer would each write his or her own version, starting over "from scratch." Important details of the President and CEO's intentions were filtered out of the message as it travelled from the Senior Vice President to the Vice President to the Supervisor and Writer. The next day, one month after the first letter had been written, the Supervisor and Writer each submitted new letters. While they

had been told that the Senior Vice President would write his draft while they wrote theirs, actually he waited until theirs were submitted, read them, and put them aside. He did not look at these texts again or integrate them into the final letter.

The rejection of these two drafts ended the period of instability during the production process of the executive letter. This phase had been brought about by several powerful forces acting in a centrifugal manner. First, the numerous audiences of the letter, combined with each participant's different priorities and constituencies of audience, caused arguments all the way up the line of the hierarchy. Second, competing purposes, such as providing a rationale for rate increases vs. celebrating the company's increased equity, linked to audience priorities (e.g. domestic vs. commercial policyholders) caused disagreements over the use of the limited space of the letter. Third, hierarchical clout and miscommunication resulting from the serial communication combined to create conflicts, both when the Supervisor delegated the drafting of the letter to the Writer and also when the Vice President, following protocol, solicited the Senior Vice President's "negative" ideas even though the Senior Vice President had not been at the brainstorming meeting with top executives.

Fourth, idiosyncratic notions of Standard Edited American English enforced by some editors contributed significantly to the rejection of one letter. Fifth, uncertainty over the values of

the new president made it easy initially to adopt the traditional approach to the letter. Yet that the organization's attitudes toward disclosure and positive emphasis in the letter were in flux soon became apparent. Sixth, because of the mixed results of the year and because of the lack of clear directions during the brainstorming meeting with executives, the established approach of full disclosure and discussion of the substantial troubles of the industry was followed for at least 42 days and then rejected when "positive" values became predominant. Seventh, the importance of the letter and its role as a personal, "subjective" statement from the President ensured that the potential conflict over two differing views of the year (partial recovery vs. financial success) would become an actuality. These powerful centrifugal forces, forces that involved every participant, caused the prolonged period of instability during the process.

Stability was restored when the Senior Vice President wrote a "success story" draft that ignored the concerns of an audience the President was not aware of--half a million policyholders who needed to be given a rationale for impending rate increases. From the standpoint of readability, the four paragraphs of financial statistics that the Senior Vice President included after a three-sentence introduction could not be called a "crowd pleaser" either. The members of the Department of Corporate Communication identified these problems but did not have the power to disagree with their superiors at this stage. The Senior

Vice President's letter was quickly approved, and he was the "hero of the hour." And so at the end of the letter production process we see that the political alignment of the participants mirrors the office layout--the executives were all in agreement and the subordinates' input was rejected. However, now the new president had put his positive stamp on the organization, he had demonstrated his authority.

The findings of this study has several implications for our understanding of group writing. First, the interplay and shifting alignment of numerous socially rooted forces may determine the outcome of group-writing endeavors. Second, at least in the collaboration examined, the forces mentioned (e.g. tight deadlines, delegating, and hierarchical distribution of power) had centrifugal and/or centripetal effects. Whether these forces act the same way in other collaborations needs to be examined. This study furthermore indicates that both centrifugal and centripetal forces can be useful and harmful in the document production process, sometimes simultaneously. The influence of hierarchical power at the end of the process, for example, brought an end to the costly endeavor but also excluded important viewpoints that would have made the letter more successful.

This study also shows that the determining decisions in writing groups in industry are not always made by consensus but rather can be determined by the high-ranking members. Also, at least in the instance described, culture is a critical component of organizational group writing. A major cause of the 77-day

construction of the two-page executive letter was that Auldouest's standards regarding disclosure, standards that had been observed for five years, changed. Periods of cultural metamorphosis may be particularly difficult for writing groups.

Two of the following ideas were suggested to me by one participant in the study, who was applying to collaborative writing ideas he had learned from a film production seminar. First, in planning meetings, rhetorical considerations including the situation, purposes, tone, and actual audiences of the letter and their importance should be thoroughly discussed, written down, and this record approved by each participant. The record ought to be kept for reference during subsequent drafting and editing sessions of the document. These records should also be kept from year to year and reviewed before the next planning of that kind of document.

Second, before the final approval of an important document, participants should meet and without threat of repercussions voice any significant reservations about the final product. Beyond these two considerations, after an important document has been sent out to its audiences, an evaluation of the writing process and end product should be made. Feedback ought to be solicited from audiences in a number of formal and/or informal ways. This feedback might help to eliminate participants' different perceived audiences of the letter and participants' different prioritizing of those audiences, as well as helping to eliminate misconceptions about the reception of the document.

Since the centripetal and centrifugal forces, inherent in any context of language, generate both cooperation and conflict, participants also are advised to have an adequate understanding of conflict and techniques of negotiation. Lastly, centripetal and centrifugal forces in the writing context should be identified so that constructive forces might be made good use of and destructive forces might be minimalized.

Since the centripetal and centrifugal forces, inherent in any context of language, generate both cooperation and conflict, participants also are advised to have an adequate understanding of conflict and techniques of negotiation. Lastly, centripetal and centrifugal forces in the writing context should be identified so that constructive forces might be made good use of and destructive forces might be minimized.

Table 2

Production of the Executive Letter

I. Centripetal Forces
   - A. Time Constraints
     1. Executives' time very expensive
     2. Tight deadline for letter
   - B. "Get-Along Attitude"

II. Convertible Forces (act as I, III, or both simultaneously)
   - A. Hierarchical Distribution of Power
   - B. Organizational Conventions of the Letter
   - C. Positive Emphasis
   - D. Not Enough Clear Direction Given

III. Centrifugal Forces
   - A. Serial Communication
   - B. Delegating
   - C. Importance of Document
   - D. Personal Nature of Document
   - E. Idiosyncratic Notions of Standard English
   - F. Mixed Results in Fiscal 1986
   - G. Several Audiences
   - H. Competing Purposes
   - I. Different Perceptions of Audience
   - J. Cultural/Power Vacuum

Table 3

The Plot--Phases of Production of the Executive Letter

1. **Stability** (Everybody's Happy)

   1.1. Dept. of Corp. Com. Brainstorm Session
   1.2. President, CEO, VP, Supervisor Brainstorming Session
   1.3. Concept outline approved early
   1.4. Supervisor delegates drafting to Writer
   1.5. Writer-Supervisor Edit--Conflict largely suppressed

2. **Instability** (Conflict)

   2.1. VP objects to draft, Supervisor challenges him
   2.2. Senior VP called in as referee--backs VP
   2.3. Writer and Supervisor revised draft OK'd by VP&Senior VP
   2.4. Executive Secretaries, President & CEO reject draft
   2.5. President defines the letter's concept to the Senior VP
   2.6. New drafts solicited from Writer & Supervisor
   2.7. Senior VP essentially ignores these drafts and follows concept of President, ignoring key audience

3. **False Resolution** (Closure but not Completion)

   3.1. Senior VP's draft, which gives President & CEO what they want at expense of company, is accepted
      3.1.1. Journalists ignored
      3.1.2. Half a million policyholders ignored

Table 4 : Perceived External Audiences of the Executive Letter

Actual Audience	Writer/Editor						
	Pres.	SVP	CEO Sec	Pr Sec	VP	Super	Writer
Fam/Friends of 33	x						
Other CEO's	1[a]	1	x		x	1*[b]	1*
Other Ins. Staff	x	x	x		x	x	
Bankers					x		
Chamber of Commerce	x						
Comp. Reps w. Clients		x					
Potential Com. Polhldrs.	x	x			x		
Commercial Polhldrs.	x				x	x	
Potent. Agents					x		
Agents	x	x	1		x	x	
Pot. Employees		x			x	x	
Pot. Dom. Polhldrs.							
Domestic Polhldrs.		x			1	x	
Media					x	x	
Public				1	x		

[a] 1 = most important; [b] * = most important external audience. The Supervisor's most important audiences were the President, the CEO, and other CEO's. The Writer's most important audiences were the President and the CEO.

AULDOUEST BUILDING

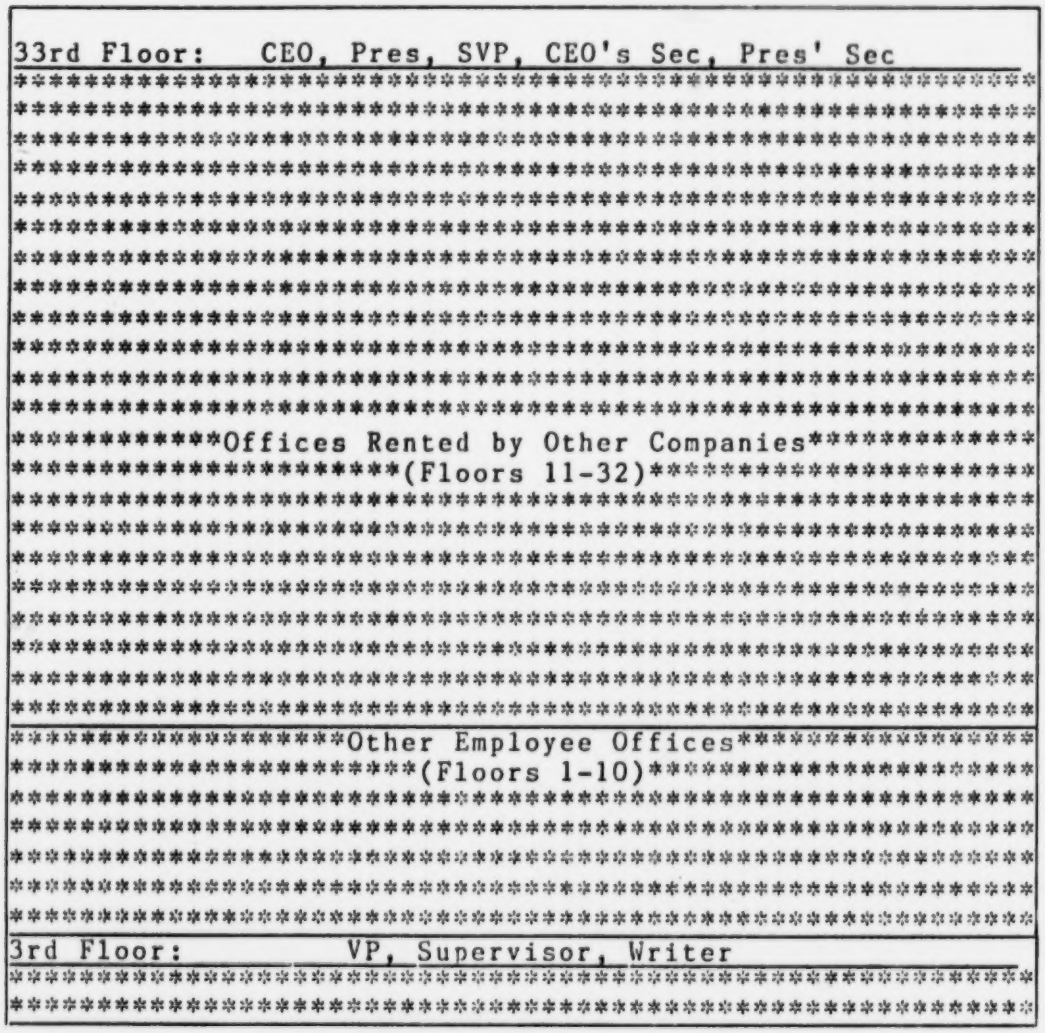
33rd Floor: CEO, Pres, SVP, CEO's Sec, Pres' Sec
Offices Rented by Other Companies
(Floors 11-32)
Other Employee Offices
(Floors 1-10)
3rd Floor: VP, Supervisor, Writer

Figure 1
Office Locations of Participants (one space = one floor)
(Participants on floors listed in order of rank)

Faigley, L., & Miller, T. (1980). What we learn about writing on the job. College English, 42, 69-74.

Geertz, C. (1973). The interpretation of cultures. New York: Basic.

Geertz, C. (1983). Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology. New York: Basic.

Goldhaber, G. M. (1983). Organizational communication (3rd ed.). Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown.

Haney, W. V. (1986). Communication and interpersonal relations: Texts and cases (5th ed.). Homewood, Il: Irwin.

Harwood, J. T. (1982). Freshman English ten years after: Writing in the world. College Composition and Communication, 33, 281-283.

Haviland, W. A. (1980). Cultural anthropology (3rd ed.). New York: Holt.

Holquist, M. (1981). Glossary. In M. M. Bakhtin The dialogic imagination (pp. 423-434). Austin: U of Texas P,.

LaRouche, M. G. & Pearson, S. S. (1985). Rhetoric and rational enterprises. Written Communication, 2(3), 246-268.

Lewis, R. A. (1971). Annual reports. Zurich: Graphics.

Lunsford, A., & Ede, L. (1986). Why write...together: A research update. Rhetoric Review, 5, 151-157.

McCarthy, L. P. (1987). A stranger in strange lands: A college student writing across the curriculum. Research in the Teaching of English, 21(3), 233-265.

Miles, M., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). Qualitative data analysis. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Miller, B. (1986 October-November). Translating the 'language' of the annual report. Northlich, Stolley Public Relations Oct.-Nov. 1986: 1, 3.

Miller, R. L., Power, F. B. & Meyer, R. L. (1983). Personal finance today. St. Paul: West.

Nash, D., & Wintrob, R. (1972). The emergence of self-consciousness in ethnography. Current Anthropology, 13, 527-542.

Bibliography

Allen, N., Atkinson N., Morgan, M., Moore, T., & Snow, C. (1987). What experienced collaborators say about collaborative writing. Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 1, 70-90.

Anderson, P. V. (1985). What survey research tells us about writing at work. In L. Odell & D. Goswami (Ed.), Writing in Nonacademic Settings (pp. 3-83). New York: Guilford.

Annual reports that fail. (1976, October 18). Business Week, p. 73.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). Discourse in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), The Dialogic Imagination (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.) (pp. 259-422). Austin: U of Texas Press.

Broadkey, L. (1987). Writing ethnographic narratives. Written Communication, 4(1), 25-50.

Cato, S. (1987, January). Keynote Address. Paper presented at the International Association of Business Communicators/Public Relations Society of America Joint Luncheon Meeting and Professional Development Seminar on the Annual Report with Sid Cato., Columbus, Ohio.

Cato, S. (1985, Spring). The annual report: 'Here I come, world'. Public Relations Quarterly, 17-21.

Church, G. J. (1986, March 24). Sorry, your policy is canceled. Time, pp. 16-26.

Doheny-Farina, S. (1984). Writing in an emergent business organization: An ethnographic study. Dissertation Abstracts International, 45 3337a. (University Microfilms No.: 8500944).

Doheny-Farina, S. (1986). Writing in an emerging organization: An ethnographic study. Written Communication, 3(2), 158-185.

Doheny-Farina, S., & Odell, L. (1985). Ethnographic research on writing: Assumptions and methodology. Writing in Nonacademic Settings (pp. 503-525). New York: Guilford.

Ede, L., & Lunsford, A. (1983). Why write...together? Rhetoric Review, 1, 150-157.

Faigley, L. (1985). Nonacademic writing: The social perspective. In L. Odell & D. Goswami (Eds.) Writing in Nonacademic Settings (pp. 231-249). New York: Guilford.

Odell, L., & Goswami, D. (1982) Writing in a non-academic setting. Research in the Teaching of English, 16, 201-223.

Odell, L., & Goswami, D. (1985). Writing in nonacademic settings. New York: Guilford.

Paradis, J., Dobrin, D. & Miller, R. (1985). Writing at Exxon ITD: Notes on the writing environment of an r&d organization. In L. Odell & D. Goswami (Eds.) Writing in nonacademic settings (pp. 281-307). New York: Guilford.

Purves, A. C., & Purves, W. C. (1986). Viewpoints: Cultures, text models, and the activity of writing. Research in the Teaching of English 20, 174-95.

Sanders, T. H. (1979). Company annual reports. Boston: Harvard U Press.

Selzer, J. (1983). The composing processes of an engineer. College Composition and Communication 34, 178-187.

Spradley, J. P. (1980). Participant observation. New York: Holt.

Stegman, J. (1987). A rhetorical investigation of selected 1982 corporate annual reports. Dissertation Abstracts International, 48, 8a (University Microfilms No. 87-10054).

Wilkinson, C.W., Wilkinson, D. & Vik, G. (1986). Communicating through writing and speaking in business (8th ed.). Homewood, IL: Irwin.